

GORBACHEV OFFERS DEAL TO LITHUANIA

Calls for Trade-Off Leading to Independence in 2 Years

By ESTHER B. FEIN

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MOSCOW, May 24 — President Mikhail S. Gorbachev said today that Lithuania could be independent in two years if the republic suspended its declaration of independence, Lithuanian officials said tonight.

The officials said they were invited this afternoon to an unscheduled meeting with Mr. Gorbachev, at which he told them that the Kremlin's economic sanctions against Lithuania would be lifted "immediately" and that independence negotiations between Moscow and the republic would begin as soon as the declaration act was frozen.

Vilnius Studying Proposal

Despite prodding from Washington and warnings from Moscow, Lithuania has refused to suspend the independence declaration it made March 11, although the Parliament voted on Wednesday to freeze legislation enacted after the act of independence if Moscow begins formal talks on the issue.

A spokesman for President Vytautas Landsbergis of Lithuania said his republic's leadership had been briefed on today's meeting and was studying Mr. Gorbachev's proposal.

"Gorbachev said that such a move would in no way threaten us, but would immediately open the door to negotiations," said Nikolai Medvedev, one of four Lithuanian officials who attended the hourlong meeting that was hastily

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called during a break in today's session of the Soviet Parliament. "And he said that once such negotiations were completed, Lithuania could be totally independent as quickly as two years from now."

Such a timetable is considerably faster than the one envisioned in the new Soviet law on secession, which calls for a negotiation period of up to five years as well as approval of independence by two-thirds of the residents of the republic in a referendum, and approval by the full Congress of People's Deputies.

'Half-Step Forward'

Until now, Mr. Gorbachev has insisted the law is the only way for any republic to leave the union. But the three Baltic republics, which were forcibly annexed by Stalin in 1940, say they were taken into the Soviet Union against their will and therefore need not follow such laws.

Mr. Medvedev said that he and his colleagues were struck by the fact that Mr. Gorbachev did not mention the need to follow the secession law, as he has in all previous talks with Lithuanian officials. They took this as a hint that the Soviet leadership might be willing to bypass the new procedures in order to end the current stalemate with Lithuania.

"I see this as a cautious but very

positive half-step forward," Mr. Medvedev said of Mr. Gorbachev's offer. "Both sides in this situation did not leave themselves much room for political maneuvering. Now we have to create neutral territory where we can meet, and I believe that Gorbachev's offer today is a very constructive step toward that."

Struggling for a Solution

Mr. Gorbachev seems to be struggling to come up with a compromise plan that would bring Moscow and Lithuania to the negotiating table before the start of his summit meeting in Washington with President Bush next week.

The two sides appeared headed toward a compromise last week when Lithuania proposed that it suspend key legislation it adopted since declaring its break from Moscow. The proposal was made during a visit to Moscow by Secretary of State James A. Baker 3d, and prompted Mr. Gorbachev to meet with Prime Minister Kazimiera Prunskiene of Lithuania.

In that meeting, Mr. Gorbachev reiterated his longstanding demand that the renegade republic place a moratorium on its declaration of independence as a condition for negotiations with Moscow.

But that progress seemed to have been stifled when the republic's Parliament failed to yield on this central point in its vote earlier this week, although it officially agreed to freeze the laws once talks begin.

This afternoon, the Soviet Prime Minister, Nikolai I. Ryzhkov, said that if the Lithuanian concessions do not mention the declaration of independence, then there was "no basis for further discussion," and he defended the Kremlin's economic sanctions against the republic.

Mr. Ryzhkov also said that he and Mr. Gorbachev, in their meeting with Prime Minister Prunskiene, made it clear that progress depended on suspension of the declaration. "We understood that she fully realized the necessity of this step," Mr. Ryzhkov told reporters at the Soviet Parliament today.

But despite the apparent rebuff by Lithuania, Mr. Gorbachev invited the Lithuanian officials to today's meeting in what seemed a further attempt to assuage their fears that Moscow could not be trusted to respect the republic's sovereignty if the declaration were suspended.

"Calling us to see him now was itself a significant sign," said Egidijus Bickauskas, a Lithuanian official who was at today's meeting.

Meeting Described as Friendly

The Lithuanian officials described the meeting as friendly, calm and constructive, in sharp contrast to a brief meeting earlier this week between Mr. Gorbachev and the presidents of the other two Baltic republics, Latvia and Estonia, which are also seeking independence from Moscow. In that meeting, described as "unpleasant" by President Arnold Ruutel of Estonia, Mr. Gorbachev angrily demanded that the three Baltic republics respect by Moscow's authority.

At today's meeting, the Lithuanian officials said, Mr. Gorbachev offered his visitors tea, sandwiches and cakes and tried hard to create a comfortable atmosphere.

"He kept asking us why we were afraid and he said that 'we are not trying to deceive you,'" Mr. Medvedev said. "And he said that his offer was not a trick to trap us. He said that even if he wanted to ignore the issue of the declaration, other people wouldn't understand. But the thing is that if we do suspend the declaration, we don't know what the hidden obstacles will be."

The Lithuanian officials said that Mr. Gorbachev said that there was pressure on him to introduce presidential rule in the republic, but that although his new expanded presidential powers afford him that opportunity, he did not see that as a reasonable act in this case.

Lithuania's situation will clearly have an impact on Latvia and Estonia, which also declared that they sought freedom from Moscow but not with the clean break Lithuanian officials espoused.